Christening

A Whitsunday Sermon

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CHRISTENING

BY

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A Whitsunday Sermon

"And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!"
Gen. xvii. 18.

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CHRISTENING.

THE cry of Abraham echoes through the Bible. The Good Book abounds in fathers and mothers and children. We are apt to think it concerned only with the history of a nation, and with men of national importance, kings and judges, prophets and priests. It does treat of these; but, scattered through the annals of nations and great men, we find many stories of family life, like the little flowering shrubs that we see under the tall trees of the forest. Here are Abraham with Ishmael and with Isaac, Jacob with Joseph and with Benjamin, David lamenting over Absalom, Hannah bringing her long-wished-for boy to the sanctuary, Solomon's judgment between the rival mothers. And, when we open the New Testament, it is a mother and her babe that begin the story. We go with Mary to the temple to sanctify her little son, and we search for him with her through the streets of Jerusalem. The wisdom of both Testaments gathers largely about children. The Proverbs concern themselves much with training them up in the way they should go, and there are no tenderer words in the Gospels than those which are spoken of the children of whose like is the kingdom of heaven. In fact, the whole Bible is a sort of family history. The story of Israel and the story of Christianity both are told in terms of father and child, and the climax of their teaching is reached in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. So the Bible abounds in stories of children, and is itself the story of a divine Father and His family.

But the keynote of the Scriptures is not only tender, but high. The care of the father is generally for what is deepest and best in the child. The cry of Abraham over his first born—"O that Ishmael might live before thee!"—is echoed in almost every story of the parental relation. Simple as life was in those days, it had its

material interests as it has now, yet the anxiety of the father and mother was for the moral and spiritual welfare of their children. We can trace what is popularly known as the Jewish taste for business through the whole history; but, when it is a question of bringing up children, it is their consciences and souls that seem to be in view. It is the godly child that is the ideal. The education of the children was a religious education. The only literature was the sacred books of the nation, and Jehovah was as real as the king or the judge. To teach the growing boy the story and the hope of his people, to bring him at thirteen to the temple at Jerusalem, and to make him as a man a patriot and a worshipper, was the aim of father and mother. To the good life worldly success and personal advancement were made secondary. The aim of Hebrew and Christian parents was expressed in the cry of Abraham: "O that Ishmael might live before thee!"

There is reason why the father and mother of to-day should ask themselves just what their ideal for their children is. Life has grown very broad and very full since those old days of the Bible. We still have religion, but it has shrunk to a narrow stream running through a broad meadow of practical life. We still have spiritual ideals, but they are apt to be voices crying in the wilderness of many worldly interests. We still care most, at least when we stop to think about it, for the character of our children. Yet both we and our children live in circumstances which have vastly changed from those of ancient Israel.

In the first place the parents of to-day are cumbered with much serving, distracted by many interests, and hurried from one to another of many pleasures and labors. The father is no longer, like the ancient carpenter or tent-maker, a worker at home. Steam and the growth of cities drag him away from his family often early in the morning, and hurl him back, tired and inert, often well into the evening. Many a man never sees his little children awake except Sundays. And even the man of business, whose hours of labor are fewer than those of the wage-earner, has his spare time well filled with various pleasures and interests, so that hardly

an evening is at his disposal for leisure; while the evenings that are free from actual engagements are rendered almost useless for any serious thought by the fatigue that life puts upon him. The mother, even in the humbler ranks, has a more complicated life than the Hannahs and Marys of the olden time. Even she has her social duties, and she certainly has appearances to keep up which absorb her energy and her thought. As to the mother of higher degree, we know what she has to say about her life,—that it is so full of engagements, mostly out of her house, that she can hardly find time to do the indispensable duties of home. Nothing has changed more in the Christian centuries than the life of woman. No one has expanded into the opportunities that city life has multiplied more than she. Into her hands fall the charities, the art, the music, the literature, and in general the finer and tenderer side of our full modern life. The rearing and training of the children must be mostly in her hands now as it always has been, but it takes only a little observation to see in what danger the mother's duty is brought by this great multiplication of the woman's privilege and opportunities. It is of course an exaggeration, and yet it has some truth in it,—the common saying that there are families in which father and mother hardly know their children when they meet them on the street.

One result of this we see in the rapid increase of boarding-schools. To a large extent this is due to the necessities of city life. The growing boy, and to some extent the growing girl, must have exercise, games, sports. It is natural and it is necessary that they should have a measure of liberty, and of space in which to use it. The pavements and sidewalks of a city are no place for this. The families who live in the city must send their children to country schools, where other hands than those into which nature put them must attend both to their education in books and to their upbuilding in heart and soul. This is a singular custom into which we are falling, of putting our boys and girls into the care of strangers during the sensitive and plastic time of their life. What with the nurse and the school-teacher, the boarding-school in winter and the camp in summer, the

child of to-day sees less and less of home and knows less and less of the parental care. It may be that this is not an evil. It is possible that home is not the best place in which, nor the father and mother the best persons by whom, our children should be brought up. Education, for instance, is becoming a science. It is falling more and more into the hands of experts. The amateur school-teacher has gone the way of the amateur nurse. The teaching of to-day is done by men and women who have been carefully trained and who make their work a career for life. Perhaps the amateur parent must go, too; and the child, once in the world, is better off under the care of impartial and impersonal minds. If so, the way is open to one of the most business-like, not to say heartless, Utopias of socialism,—the care of all children by the State. Certainly the development of modern family life tends in that direction. Few things have been so affected by the crowded life of to-day as the relation between parent and child.

In the second place the child's own life has changed. Most children, half a century ago, had some kind of work to do, bore some responsibility for the supply and order of the home. The boy in the country had to help about the farm. The boy in the village had his "chores" to do. Most of us can recall very vividly the wood we had to cut, the water we had to draw, and the sidewalk we had to clear of snow. Both in country and in village the girl had to help in the housekeeping. The result of all this was a wholesome training in industry, self-reliance, and the sense of responsibility for some part of the world's work. The boys and girls learned that life did not go of itself, and that every one had a share of it in his charge.

In our city life, however, the children are left empty-handed. The expert takes away the child's work as he takes away that of the parent. The coal is brought and put in, the water is laid on, and some towns take away the last refuge of the boy's responsibility by clearing the walks of snow. There still remains something for the girls to do in the house, but it grows less necessary as servants grow more common, so that those who would have been capable young housekeepers in

the village are left in our cities to less useful and sometimes less wholesome activities. The strain that is put upon young characters by thus emptying life of all compulsory occupation and of all responsibility for the common welfare is very serious. The times are hard upon a young woman who is not obliged to do anything useful, and who cannot force herself into the world of work without crowding out some one who needs the reward of labor.

Perhaps the rapid growth of athletics might furnish a substitute for work in the case of boys. They involve discipline, they compel careful thought and intense labor, and they develop *esprit de corps*. But for some reason sport always leads into shady ways. The revelations that have been made of late about the practices prevalent in our colleges make us ask whether our boys are not developing their bodies at the expense not only of their minds, but also of their souls, and make us sadly doubt what is to be the outcome, in the business and professional life of the coming men, of the dishonorable and savage practices which are countenanced by the ethics of school and college. If the end justifies the means in the university, it is very apt to do so in the market and the office.

So the home situation to-day is this: There is more material comfort than ever before, blossoming fast into luxury. There are opportunities for the education of the mind such as no other generation has ever seen; and books, pictures, music, amusements, are in greater abundance. The problem of the home is moral and spiritual, and in face of it stand fathers and mothers whose tendency is to throw off their responsibilities upon others. In fact, there is a tendency to decline responsibility altogether even at home. The child is set free from parental control to an extent which our ancestors would have considered ruinous. The freedom of our American children is very great,—often complete. In some respects, our boys and girls have responded to the trust we have placed in them. They are frank, truthful, sincere, haters of sham and cant, self-reliant. In personal purity they probably have no equals in the world and have had none in history. So far their

freedom has made them strong. So far the parent's cry, "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" is often answered to his satisfaction.

But there is another side on which the growing generation is not so strong. It is a maxim that no one can learn to command who has not learned to obey. It is absurd to say that those who are in their teens have learned all there is to know, or are wholly capable of directing their own lives. The parent therefore cannot abdicate his authority. He must take the labor with the love, the responsibility with the privilege. The lack of parental control means weakness in the child. It means more than this,—the lack of the ability to look up, to respect greater wisdom, to admire higher character,—in a word, it means to lack reverence. It may be said that not only self-control, but religion, begins in the home. It begins there, not merely in the prayers which are taught in the nursery, but in the general attitude of respect which the child is taught and even forced to take toward greater age, experience, and knowledge. The home in which there is no disposition to listen to what father or mother says is a home in which true religion lacks roots. Perhaps we may go further and say this of a home in which young people are allowed to be disrespectful of any one of greater age and experience. It may be laid down as beyond question that to encourage the careless and flippant criticism of good men and women by the boys and girls under our charge is mischievous, and will react sooner or later not only upon ourselves, but upon our children. The conceit of knowing it all, of being able to pass judgment upon those who are recognized as capable and respectable in their places, is as harmful as it is false. To be conscious of one's own ignorance, to know. that there are others who are more wise or experienced, and to defer to them, are necessary to all ambition to know and to grow for one's self, and are the roots of that reverence for what is higher that ripens into the worship and obedience of God. The lack of these roots is the source of what we most deplore in the rising generation, the want of good manners, of habits of industry, concentration, and persistence, impatience of control and of submission to moral and religious

culture. The responsibility lies in the home, for there is the opportunity. The school and the church stand ready to do their parts, but the home must take the initiative and must furnish the indorsement. There is a wail from all churches and all sects without exception that young people are not found in the houses of worship as they used to be. But where is the responsibility? Not with the churches or with the children. Young people never liked to go to church. They went because they had to go. They never liked to go to school; but they had to go, and they have to go still. Let going to school rest on the mere liking of the child, and we shall see there what we see in the churches. The change in the religious habits of young people does not come from any change in the church, but from the great change in the home, the reluctance of parents to regulate the lives of their children.

So all things point to the need of an awakening to the responsibility of the parent for the higher life of the child. We have more comfort and luxury than ever before; we have better means of amusement and education; we have abundance of art, literature, music. Our young people are, in consequence, bright and genuine, but careless of the higher life. The parent, in the haste and fatigue of modern life, tends to hand over all that he can to experts in various lines. Whether he can shift the burden of the higher culture upon others or not, in some way he needs to be aroused to the necessity of his children's having that culture. Somehow he must raise in his own heart the cry of Abraham, "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" Ishmaels our children are getting to be, frank, free, generous, fair, self-reliant, but careless and wild. Ishmael and Esau are always their choice before the meditative Isaac and the industrious Jacob, but the line of Israel ran not through the free and irresponsible sons, but through the careful and self-restrained. The future of this age does not lie in those who are growing up in homes of luxury, untrained by labor, responsibility, and obedience, so much as in those who are taken in hand by adverse circumstances or conscientious parents, and disciplined into strong manhood and womanhood.

Sometimes we are asked what the christening of children means. What it does not mean we know well. Many ghosts of old superstitions flee from the baptismal font before our modern light. We cannot believe that any change is wrought in the unconscious child by or through the touch of water. The effect is on the parents. It is the consecration of them. They have brought the child into the world. They love it and wish to do all they can for it. They are sure to care for its body, what it shall eat and wherewithal it shall be clothed. They are sure to care for its mind, to give it the best instruction that they can secure. In a way they are sure to care for its manners, that they shall conform to the requirements of refined society. All these things the father and mother are compelled to attend to by the pressure of the common sentiment of the world or of their social circle. There are many cares and anxieties which they are sure not only to have, but to exaggerate. Those who have no children, or whose children have not arrived at sufficient age, stand astonished at some things that rob fathers and mothers of sleep and weigh down their days with worry or disappointment, so irrelevant and unnecessary to happiness do they seem.

But what fathers and mothers need to be reminded of is what they so often forget among meaner anxieties,—their duty toward their child's highest life, the life of the soul, which may be independent of all circumstances, and need not hang on the favor of any social circle or family line. The service of christening, besides giving the name, binds the parents to the education of their child in the eternal life of love and trust, of sympathy and cheerfulness, of conscientiousness and purity. These are the best things, and yet they are apt to be the most surely forgotten. How often we wake to the dreadful fact that, while we have trained our children in certain conventional ways, have given them the education of the day, have even given them accomplishments, we have been as those of old who gave tithes of mint, anise, and cummin, and forgot the weightier matters of the law,—justice, mercy, and truth. We have taken thought for food and raiment, but have not sought, first, the kingdom of God and his righteousness. We

have given our boys and girls everything else, but have left out the food of the soul. Here they are, heirs of all that a great material civilization can leave to them, but selfish, fretful, weak of will, without the serenity of a true faith. Like the ancient king at his luxurious table, we see written on the wall the verdict upon our fatherhood and motherhood, "Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting."

So the ancient service of infant baptism has a very beautiful meaning and a very much needed use for us. It is the consecration of the father and mother to the highest function of the parent. It is the reminder of that which in the haste and multiplicity of our modern life we are most apt to forget, that there is an eternal life here and now, independent of circumstances and of the world itself, which, if any one lack, he is poor indeed, however great his fortune, and a failure indeed, however great his success in the eyes of men. Of all our Christian rites there is none more beautiful or more significant, and it will be a great loss if ever it falls out of our family life. The best of us cannot afford to lose at the very beginning of our life with our children this consecration of ourselves to their spiritual education.

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